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“TRACES OF THE EXOTIC” IN VERNON LEE’S “OKE OF OKEHURST; OR, THE PHANTOM LOVER”

Sally Blackburn-Daniels^a and Sophie Geoffroy^b

^aFaculty of the Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University, Cheshire, UK; ^bRésidence Marie Galante, Saint Gilles les Bains, France

ABSTRACT

Okehurst – the stately home in Vernon Lee’s “Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover” – is the epitome of English architecture, dating back to “Norman or Saxon” times. Yet inside, the house is populated with far-flung objects and traces of the exotic: Persian rugs, majolica ornaments, and “rose-leaves and spices put into china bowls.” The house and its contents are intoxicating, and nothing is more exotic, perfumed, or exquisite than Alice, who with her husband (and cousin) William Oke are the last members of the family’s line. Okehurst also reverberates with the presences of its previous inhabitants which drive the current Okes to repeat the family’s history of madness and murder. The haunting of Okehurst is particularly interesting when considered alongside material from Lee’s archive. This paper will consider the traces of Lee’s own complex ancestry and the problems of empire and matrilineal ancestral wealth and inheritance, whilst utilising correspondence from Lee to her mother, and her partner, Mary Robinson to suggest the possible inspiration for Cotes Common and Okehurst Manor. Throughout this consideration of haunted spaces – both inside and outside – this paper will also make reference to the 1886 manuscript of “Oke of Okehurst,” which has never previously been studied.

KEYWORDS Vernon Lee; hauntology; intertextuality; colonialism; the fantastic; projection

Introduction

Vernon Lee was the adopted name of Violet Paget (1856–1935), a writer whose diverse literary legacy includes essays on art history and philosophical aesthetics, open letters on vivisection, petitions against the demolition of the historic centre of Florence, publications on women’s rights, as well as novels, novellas and short story collections. She wrote (and was published) from the age of fourteen, until the last years of her life, and could do so in four languages. Her pseudonym was not merely that; she wrote privately and

CONTACT Sally Blackburn-Daniels  sally.blackburn-daniels@open.ac.uk

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publicly as Lee, and was known as this by friends and lovers. Lee's most recognised works (and those that are now subject to the most critical scrutiny) are her three collections of fantastic tales: *Hauntings: Fantastic Tales* (1890), *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (1907) and *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927). It is this first collection of stories, *Hauntings* that we wish to examine here.

On 23 April 1890, *The Pall Mall Gazette* published a review of Vernon Lee's *Hauntings*. It began:

In "Oke of Okehurst" (a masterly story in its way) there is absolutely nothing supernatural. Oke's "maniac frown" on which the narrator insists a little too often, affords a perfectly natural key to the whole deplorable episode [...] The thoroughly successful ghost-story, in short, must either be blood-curdling fact or an unblushing fiction. When the hypothesis of morbid self-deception is possible, the case may be appalling as an instance of mental disease, but it is not a true ghost story.¹

The *Pall Mall*'s review suggested that Lee had failed to fulfil the "contract" of the title *Hauntings*, by failing to provide the "real" or true supernatural experience. The review continues that Lee's work was tested under the most "fitting conditions": *Hauntings* was read "at the witches' noon, by the light of a single candle, in the lonely wing of a house two centuries old." Despite the seemingly environment, "the longed-for shiver never came."² By creating a tableau of test conditions, the reviewer grandstands their knowledge of the traditions of the supernatural as a genre: the haunted house, the noises that "startle the still night," the figures just out of sight, and, unfortunately for Lee, the book is mauled for lack of these tropes. Oliver Tearle claims that Lee's supernatural stories "privilege subjective sensory experience and individual impression" which he argues "breaks away from conventional Victorian fiction – even the Victorian ghost story – and gestures towards new territory."³ Therefore, we contend that Lee's lack of "success" as a "supernatural artist" is not because she has failed to recognise these conventions, or that she lacks the writerly skill to conjure spectres, as she makes apparent in *Hauntings*' preface:

We were talking last evening – as the blue moon-mist poured in through the old-fashioned grated window, and mingled with our yellow lamplight at the table [...] 'tis the mystery that touches us, the vague shroud of moonbeams that hang about the haunting lady [...] scarcely outlined, scarcely separated from the surrounding trees; or walks, and sucked back, even anon, into the flickering shadows.⁴

Here, as a precursor to the book, Lee provides her reader with a fully rendered experience that evokes the essence of the supernatural, and the spectral. Lee highlights her role as mere *raconteur* and ascribes the effects of her ghost story to its oral origins and to the active participation of the audience in building up the thrill experienced by the group of listeners. Lee's preface continues:

Hence, my four little tales are of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense; they tell of no hauntings such as could be contributed by the Society for Psychical Research [...] I can affirm only one thing, that they haunted certain brains, and have haunted, among others, my own and my friends.⁵

Lee suggests that her ghosts are spurious, not those to be studied by Frederic W. H. Myers and Edmund Gurney's Society for Psychical Research, which was founded in 1882, eight years before the publication of *Hauntings*. The society was the first to empirically study psychic or paranormal events. Tearle notes how Lee "gently satirizes the accounts of such ghostly sightings recorded by SPR members [...] and draws attention to the commonplace banality of the ghosts that feature in such real-life accounts."⁶ The SPR was something Lee knew first-hand. In a letter to her mother Matilda in July 1885 Lee's (private) critique is far from gentle. She writes that she and Alice Callander went to a meeting of the SPR after Gurney sent her tickets. Acerbically she notes "[i]t was a very dull business, consisting mainly of avowals of failed experiments. Gurney looks weary and embittered. The rest singularly water on the brain."⁷

A key text in *Hauntings*, and one pivotal for understanding Lee's spurious ghosts is "Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover." In Lee's dedication of "Oke" to Peter Boutourline, Lee writes "any charm that story ['Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover'] may have," might be "put down [...] to the way in which we had been working ourselves up, that firelight evening, with all manner of fantastic stuff."⁸ The dedication recalls Lee "telling [Boutourline], one afternoon that [he] sat upon the hearth-stool at Florence, the story of Mrs Oke of Okehurst", and his enthusiastic response to this winter's tale of Lee's, and his encouragement to write it down:

You thought it a fantastic tale, you lover of fantastic things, and urged me to write it out at once, although I protested that, in such matters, to write is to exorcise, to dispel the charm; and that printer's ink chases away the ghosts that may pleasantly haunt us, as efficaciously as gallons of holy water.

The ghosts of "Okehurst" present at Lee's hearth in Florence were partly induced by their discussion of the fantastic – which gave "Oke" its charm. The reader is left wondering if this charm will be absent from their own engagement with the tale as to write is to exorcise the story of its spirit. Yet this notion did not dispel Lee's writing of it, nor its publication.

Lee approached William Blackwood the publisher with "Oke" on 13 April 1886 for inclusion in his magazine.⁹ Anthony Mandal notes that Blackwood played a major role in nineteenth-century literary publication, with *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817–1980) "intimately associated" with ghost stories gothic tales.¹⁰ In a letter to her mother, Matilda, in June 1886 Lee expresses her surprise and delight that her pitch paid off: "[O]n returning I [found] an astounding letter from Blackwood, offering to publish Oke of

Okehurst as a *shilling dreadful*, which of course I shall accept.”¹¹ Lee’s letter by return to Blackwood was more pragmatic, with a detailed expression of her terms:

I have always dearly wished to produce a shilling dreadful, little guessing that I had produced one unconsciously. If you determine on the shilling dreadful; which I think is the best plan, as my name may go some way, may I say that I am quite pleased with the terms from a financial point of view; but that I should like the copyright to revert to me after some time, not from any unseemly hope of money, but because I have two other tales – one the *Medea* which you thought too historical – which I want at some distant period to publish with *Oke*.¹²

Lee’s desire to regain the copyright was by no means unusual. Mandal suggests that this arrangement could secure the author an “initial lump sum while benefitting from the reversion of rights for later publication in cheap or edited editions.”¹³

That same year, Blackwood published “Oke” as *A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Story*, the second title the work was to be known by. Lee’s original title “Oke of Okehurst” had the figure of Oke, and the house, Okehurst at the fore, and revealed the interrelation between the space and its occupier. The 1886 publication focused upon a *phantom lover* – a paranormal paramour – and was hugely successful: A delighted Lee wrote to her mother “[a]ll along the line from Leeds here I saw my Phantom Lover on the bookstalls. I felt celebrated!”¹⁴ Four years later, after the reversion of the copyright to Lee, “Oke” was collated with “Amour Dure” and “Dionea” and included in *Hauntings, Fantastic Tales* (as we have seen). By now, the title had changed once more to “Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover,” a bringing together of the work’s previous identities.¹⁵

“Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover” is narrated by an unnamed artist as he reflects upon the tragic events at Okehurst, a stately home owned by the last surviving members of the Oke family. The Okes had lived in Okehurst since the sixteenth century, and had served in the court of kings, and dedicated themselves to public service since. William and Alice, descendants of the Okes – as well as cousins and spouses – desire to have their portraits painted to hang in the great hall of Okehurst alongside those of their ancestors. The artist narrator is commissioned to join William and Alice at their home, and attempts his task. The artist soon notes that present-day Alice bears a striking physical similarity with her ancestress, Alice Oke, which delights present-day Alice. Yet it is not just a physical resemblance, present-day Alice becomes a conduit for ancestral-Alice’s feelings for a young poet, who was murdered out on the moorland at Cotes Common by ancestral-Alice. Oliver Tearle suggests, “Mrs Oke’s similarity to her seventeenth-century namesake, and her ‘romance’ with her namesake’s ghostly paramour, the Cavalier poet Lovelock, thwarts the

narrator in his artistic task,” and the artist-narrator is unable to capture present-day Alice’s likeness.¹⁶ Present-day Alice’s infatuation with the murdered poet resurrects Lovelock in the mind of William Oke, who “witnesses” the poet’s spectral figure in the grounds of Okehurst. In an attempt to stop Alice’s supposed extra-marital, supernatural affair, William takes his shotgun and aims at what he believes is the poet, but instead he hits Alice, and kills her immediately. Consumed by despair and madness, he attempts suicide, eventually dying days later.

The translation of “A Phantom Lover” into French in the daily newspaper *Le Matin*: *derniers télégrammes de la nuit*, in nine instalments as “Le Feuilleton du Matin” (daily series) on 10 August and 11–20 October 1900 was similarly titled: “L’Amoureux fantôme”. A century later, in 1990, Michel Desforges’s translation of the story into French is entitled *Alice Oke* with the cover bearing a photograph portrait of Julia Jackson by Julia Margaret Cameron. Whilst the title and image is clearly feminine, it is distinctly suggestive of melancholy, perhaps even madness, rather than the *fantôme* figure the title has led the reader to expect.¹⁷ This shift suggests a return to Lee’s subtitle – *A Fantastic Tale* – and traction within literary circles of Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the fantastic. Todorov’s *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970) is concerned with the space between psychological or supernatural explanations for events, and the hesitation between this “is, or the is not.”¹⁸

In thinking about haunting as both meta-psychological and supernatural, we require a methodological framework that is able to apply itself to manifestation of phantoms in both the internal space of the psyche, alongside natural landscapes and architectural spaces. As many critics before us, we will utilise as the foundation of our framework Jacques Derrida’s term *hauntology* (*hantologie* in French), a portmanteau of *haunting* and *ontology*. This term appeared (briefly) in *Spectres of Marx* (1993) as a means to critique the historic spectre of communism. More recently, critics such as Peter Buse and Andrew Stott have conceptually expanded the term beyond “haunting as metaphor” in literary and cultural studies, to suggest a particular form of atemporality present at the site of a haunting, and the resulting difficulty therefrom of “conceptually solidifying the past.” They explain that:

Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past, even if the apparition represents someone who has been dead for many centuries, for the simple reason that a ghost is clearly not the same thing as the person who shares its proper name. Does then the “historical” person who is identified with the ghost properly belong to the present? [...] Derrida has been pleased to term this dual movement of return and inauguration a ‘hauntology’, a coinage that suggests a spectrally deferred non-origin within grounding metaphysical terms such as history and identity. Any attempt to isolate the origin of language will find

its inaugural moment already dependent upon a system of linguistic differences that have been installed prior to the “originary” moment.¹⁹

Whilst Buse and Stott suggest a form of prior embodiment as a prerequisite for the effect of hauntology, and Derrida’s spectre is ideological, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska develops these notions further, by intertwining hauntology with textual interconnectivity, more broadly known as *intertextuality*. As Lorek-Jezińska recognises, the intertextual reading can become expansive, so we wish to interrogate the text using the specific focus of paratextuality. Paratexts are the “borderlands of the text,” described by Gérard Genette as “all those things which we are never certain belong to the text of a work but which contribute to present – or ‘presentify’ – the text by making it into a book.”²⁰ The paratext is a transitional and transactional zone that exists between the text and the non-text, a sort of textual liminality, which allows us as readers to establish the kind of text we are presented with, and how to read it. Moreover, the paratext can be divided into two further categories: peritextual elements, for example; titles, chapter titles, prefaces and notes; and epitextual elements, such as interviews, announcements, reviews, private letters and other authorial or editorial decisions. In this sense, we can suggest that the traditional terms of the ghost story (the figure of the *phantom* and the notion of *haunting* as frequent supernatural presence within a significant location, with something to communicate to a significant character) are disrupted by the iterability of the peritextual titles for “Oke” – both as the short story/ novella, and as an element of the collection *Hauntings* – and the apparent disconnect between them and the narrative.

Hauntology, in effect, provides us with a framework for examining the traces present within the text; the disembodied persons, historical acts that linger, the past becoming present. Tearle’s essay on Lee recognises this as a feature of the ghost narrative, particularly those stories produced by Lee in which “the ghost implies [an] emphasis on the past, and the return of the past, [and] the interruption of history into the present moment.”²¹ We would like to argue that a certain number of these hauntological remnants are shared between Lee and Alice Oke; Lee’s biography and experience feed into the text as disembodied figures and haunted spaces. It is Genette’s paratext that provides us with the impetus for excavating the genetic material of the text, and the semantic lexicon to discuss these artefacts. It is the paratextual elements which lie on the peripheries of the text – the titles, letters, press reviews – that enable us to recognise the potential inspiration behind the hauntological traces found in “Oke”.

With this methodology in mind, this essay will consider the ways in which Lee’s ancestry and her visits to Coates and Godinton manifest themselves within the *originary* moment – the haunting – of the text. We will focus

particularly upon the paratextual borderlands of the text, and the hauntological makeup of the Alice Oke/s of Okehurst. In suggesting the importance of Lee's own intertext on Alice, we will consider Lee's family history to suggest how the concept of the phantom is representative of a transgenerational silence and her colonial family past.

The MSS as a Haunted, Haunting Object

In December 1887, Vernon Lee had the manuscript of "Oke of Okehurst" (dated April 11, 1886) bound, with other works and had it sent to the writer, and her partner, Agnes Mary Frances Robinson as a Christmas present (Figure 1). This MSS – currently part of the digitisation project *Holographical-Lee* (HoL)²² – is an interesting object *per se*. One might even say, a haunted object suggestive of the persistent presence of Lee's personal ghosts.

The volume can be read both ways: starting from page 1 to page 130, is the handwritten narrative "Oke of Okehurst." And backwards, starting from the back cover, Lee's eleven-page tale "The Legend of Hilarion, How he Witnessed the Nativity of Our Lord; set forth in words, after the panel of Brother Philip Lippi, by Vernon Lee" (Figure 2). The tale, clearly an ekphrasis, is illustrated by Fra Lippi's panel, and inscribed "To dear Mouse [Mary Robinson] / with a merry Xmas" (Figure 3). This story, added several months after Oke was published, testifies to the paratextual edges of "Oke of Okehurst." Whilst Robinson is not immediately connected with the narrative, her relationship with Lee haunts the peripheries of the text, as a companion through haunted landscapes, as we shall see below.

Back, Back and Forth and Forth

Four years prior to the publication of *A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Tale* Lee had travelled from London with Mary to stay in a cottage at Waltham Park, near Pullborough in West Sussex. Whilst there, Lee often visited friends – the Callwells, and the artist Arthur Lemon and his family – who were staying close to Fittleworth, a village renowned for attracting artists. In a letter to her mother Matilda Lee wrote "[y]esterday evening we walked across the common and hills to Coates Farm. The Callwells & Lemons walked back with us & Mr Lemon told us some very weird ghostly experiences he has had. He has a very haunted head."²³

It is not only Lemon's haunted-ness that remains with Lee, she frequently describes the landscape: Lee explains to her mother that the surrounding common land between the farm at Waltham and Coates has the "loveliest pink & white & purple patches of heathers, & the oak and pinewoods in the distance."²⁴ Even for July, her letter suggests, the weather is very cold, with rain every day, so it seems fitting that Lee's friend and amateur

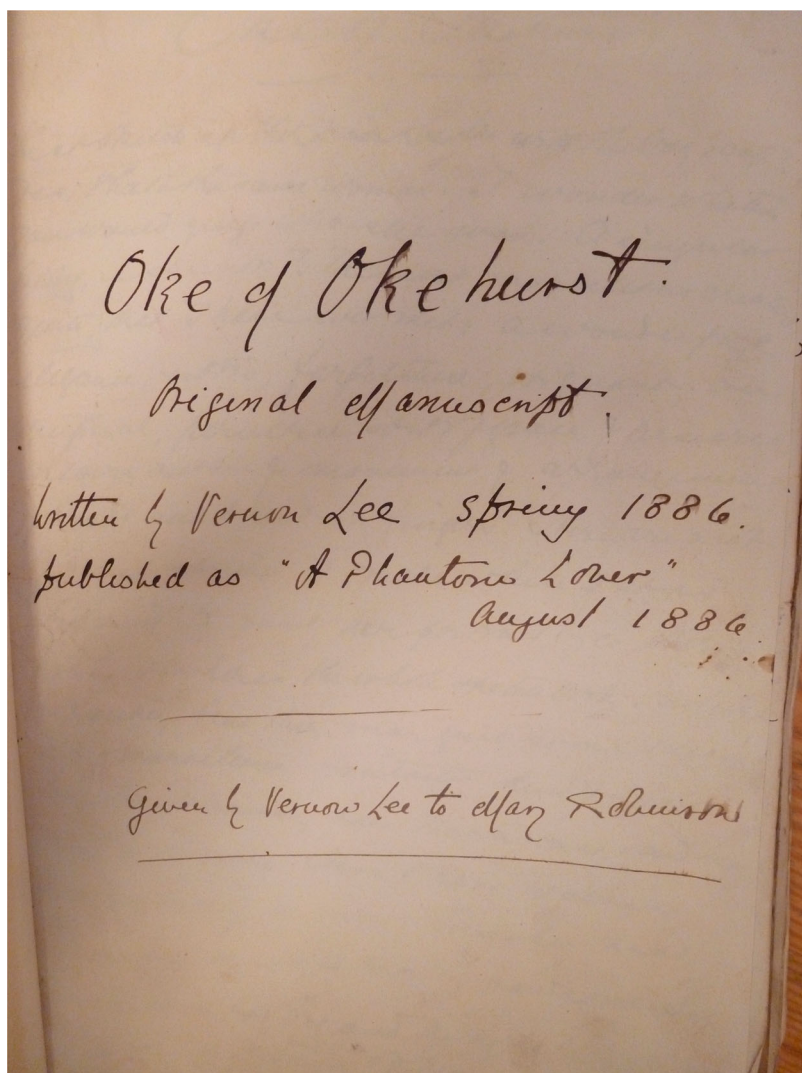


Figure 1. Vernon Lee, *Oke of Okehurst*, MSS, title page, 1886, Spring to August. With the kind permission of Geneviève Noufflard.⁵⁵

painter Annette Callwell has “given her a very pretty sketch of a piece of boggy common” which she will bring back to Florence with her. Our research suggests that it is Coates Common (see [Figure 4](#)), that provides inspiration for Cotes Common where Alice Oke murders the poet Lovelock. Whilst the landscape of Cotes is not haunted by a spirit, it is subject to an interweaving of complex topography and histories. Mark Riley suggests that in this way, landscape can be intensified by “personal and collective memory.”²⁵ It is these personal and public histories, according to Merlin

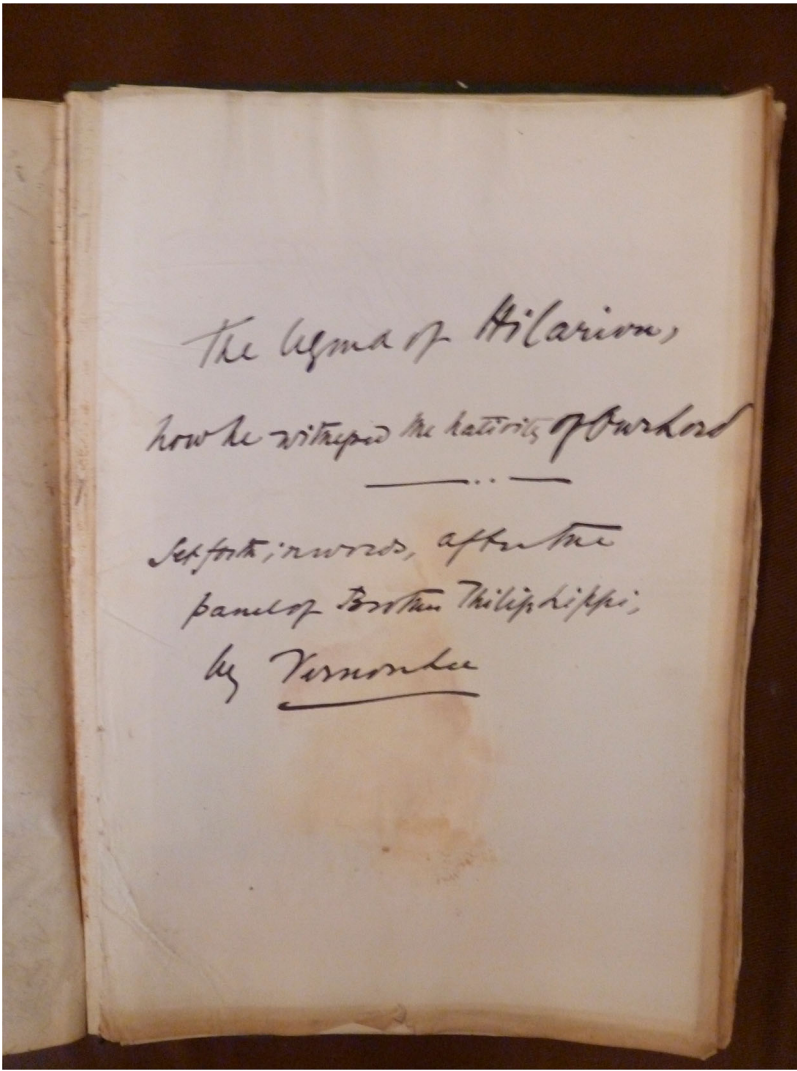


Figure 2. Vernon Lee, *The Legend of Hilarion*, MSS, title page, 1886, December. With the kind permission of Geneviève Noufflard.⁵⁶

Coverley, that reside within the environment, and that is what makes the supernatural in Lee “insubstantial and associative.”²⁶ It is therefore significant that Lee situates “Oke” in England, the first of the only two fantastic tales in her oeuvre not set on the continent.²⁷ As we discuss below, this is in part due to Lee’s experiences as a British ex-pat, whose colonial heritage is tied to her maternal families’ homeland. In order to excavate these paratextual layers of personal history that haunt the landscapes of “Oke of Oke-hurst” we need to consult the private epitext; particularly Lee’s

correspondence. The originary moment in “Oke” below condenses the topographical and elemental details present within Lee’s correspondence, layering them tightly with the stories of (ancestral) Alice Oke and Lovelock, and (present-day) Alice Oke and the Artist Narrator:

At last we got to an open space, a high-lying piece of common-land [...] it seemed quite preternaturally high up, giving a sense that its extent of flat heather and gorse, bound by distant firs, was really on top of the world [...] A cold wind swept in our faces.

“What is the name of this place?” [...]

“It is called Cotes Common,” answered Mrs. Oke, who had slackened the pace of the horse, and let the reins hang loose about his neck. “It was here that Christopher Lovelock was killed.”²⁸

During Alice and the Artist’s visit to the common, the pinks and whites of the heather are tainted by the dying sunlight’s “crimson ripples” and the psychogeographic resonances of Lovelock’s spilled blood. Lee’s narration mentions repeatedly the “yellow gravel-pits” on the common, a sight still evident today. Local guides to the area suggest that the gravel-pits are a landmark; “Coates Common [...] has a mosaic of oak and birch woodland, conifer plantations, open sandy heaths and rough grazed pasture”, with an area of specific environmental interest called the “sandpit”.²⁹ Lee’s visit with Lemon provided topographical and nominative inspiration for the narrative, that when combined with Lemon’s weird ghostly experiences, haunted the writer’s mind. The temporal return to Coates in “Oke of Okehurst” is one of many examples in which Lee’s personal experiences haunt her textual output. Coates, the personal experiences in the present, and the projection of narratives of the supernatural onto the site presents the place as palimpsest, with each layer existing within its own temporality, and cumulatively as a temporal palimpsest fixed within the West Sussex landscape.

It is not only the wind-swept and heather strewn common of Coates that provided inspiration for location in “Oke of Okehurst.” The stately home Godinton, Kent, haunts Lee’s text as a model for Okehurst Manor. Whilst Emma Liggins notes that the Female Gothic has traditionally been associated with the fear of confinement within the home, she also notes the ways in which the genre is subversive – and pushes against patriarchal structures and entrapment within the domestic sphere.³⁰ Lee directly connects Alice Oke to the manor house, emphasising a sense of belonging. Lee visited Godinton in August 1885, again with Mary Robinson. She wrote of the house to Matilda:

This morning he [Mr Austin] took Mary & me over the real manor house, called Goddington [*sic*], a perfect house of the early 17th century, with a

most beautiful hall, carved fireplaces & stairs & panelling. I think I shall use it up in a ghost story I am projecting.³¹

Lee visited Godinton again in September 1886, five months after Blackwood's had accepted Lee's manuscript for publication. In a letter to Robinson (who was not with her on this occasion) she notes that she "felt quite eery on seeing Goddinton [*sic*]" once more, and that she was "sure exactly on which side of the house the yellow room is."³² Lee utilised the same term "eery" to both Blackwood's and to Robinson to describe the narrative and the house. Godinton was inhabited by the Toke family, who had lived in the house from 1440, and would continue to do so, until 1895. The Toke family had plenty of charismatic Nicholas Tokes – including Captain Nicholas Toke (1585–1677) living at the time of Alice Oke (née Pomfret, 1626), who died at the age of 92, on the way to London to marry his sixth wife.³³ His desire to marry at such a ripe old age, was driven by the desire to have a son and heir, to keep Godinton in the family. Unfortunately, Toke was unable to consummate his final marriage, and the house was inherited by his nephew, John Toke. The portrait of a dashing Captain Nicholas Toke hangs currently in the Great Hall at Godinton.³⁴ Lee describes (and transcribes to "Oke of Okehurst") the Great Hall as a "huge hall" with an "immense fireplace of delicately carved and inlaid grey and black stone, and its rows of family portraits, reaching from the wainscoting to the oaken ceiling, vaulted and ribbed like a ship's hull".³⁵ Why does Lee's narrator repeatedly liken the ceiling in the Great Hall to that of a ship's hull?³⁶

Like the nave (literally: ship) in churches and sacred buildings which symbolises the vetero-testamentary trials and tribulations of the exiled elect people, the hull shaped hall may metaphorically recall the peregrinations of some close friends of the Pagets', fellow expatriates from distant colonies. An example of this is Lee's early literary mentor, Jamaica-born novelist Henrietta Jenkin, and her husband Captain Jenkin. Henrietta addressed the slavery issue in her novel *Cousin Stella: Or, Conflict* (1859). More importantly, it is reminiscent of Lee's family's maritime ventures (on her father's side, the "de Fragnier-Paget" line as well as her step-brother's side, such as Eugene's father: Captain Lee-Hamilton) and colonial pursuits (Lee's maternal ancestry).

The decadent objects artistically displayed throughout Okehurst (and its model Godinton) are ample proof that members of the family have travelled extensively, and share a colonial legacy akin to that of Lee's family. William Oke's study materially reveals his colonial pursuits in his younger days; he has "a polar bear beneath his feet" and on the walls displayed "whips, guns, and fishing-rods".³⁷ Alice too, is imbibed with traces of the exotic; she is described by the artist as *rare and exotic*, and a "[m]arvellous, weird, exquisite creature", whom both Oke and himself want to contain –

Oke in Okehurst, and the artist, on the canvas. Even the artist's rooms are decorated with Oriental artefacts, he sits in reverie amongst the "Persian rugs and majolica," the vague scents "of rose-leaves and spices, put into china bowls by the hands of ladies long since dead", and encounters a "kind of voluptuousness, peculiar and complex and indescribable, like the half-drunkenness of opium or haschisch".³⁸ The artist's voyage into the heady daydream inspired by the colonial antiquities, certainly suggests that this decadence is intoxicating. William Oke notes that his family, in particular Nicholas, had a *wanderlust*, and had "sought adventures in America".³⁹ Oke's reticence to discuss Nicholas in any details, and his embarrassment at hearing his name mentioned is often in part due to the connection to Lovelock's murder. Yet we would like to argue that perhaps to some extent, William Oke shares some of Lee's personal embarrassment at her colonial heritage, and slave-owning ancestry.

Abadam' Family Values

Vernon Lee's first biographer, Peter Gunn, provides little more than a short paragraph on Lee's ancestry; focusing on her maternal grandfather, and hinting at his involvement with the West Indian slave trade.⁴⁰ Lee's mother, Matilda Adams (1815–1896) was the daughter of Edward Hamlin Adams (1777–1842), who was born in Jamaica, and who Peter Gunn acknowledges to have been a rich man, coming from "an old colonial family," "with extensive business interests in the West Indies, including a banking house in Jamaica."⁴¹ Research in the Jamaican & Barbados Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664–1879, census records, and the Caribbean Birth Death and Marriage Index information, reveals that the family presence in the West Indies stretched back to colonial plantation settlements in the 1640s.⁴²

Currently, there are no records showing Edward Hamlin Adams's (Lee's grandfather) ownership of plantations, yet he was trustee for the Hungerford Spooner Charlottenburg Estate in Jamaica, which increased its slave population from 101 at the start of Edward's trusteeship to 208 at the end of his association in 1826. The main crops of the Charlottenburg Estate were sugar and rum.⁴³ Edward was also a retired partner for the Kingston Merchant House in Jamaica, but despite being heavily involved within the merchant trade he found employment as a lawyer and banker. On Edward's return to England after abolition he bought Middleton Hall in Carmarthen-shire in 1824 from Sir William Paxton, undoubtedly with a fortune amassed from profits from slavery, earned and inherited. The beautiful park has now become the National Botanic Park of Wales.⁴⁴

Lee's mother, Matilda Adams (1816–1896) was the seventh (and last) child of Edward and his wife Amelia, and was for a long time deprived of

her rights to the family estate by her eldest brother Edward Hamlin Middleton Abadams, who inherited the house and property in 1842 and added the prefix “Ab” to “Adams” to suggest royal descent “from Adam”.

Lee writes to A. Mary F. Robinson after visiting her cousin Lucy at Middleton Hall in 1882:

Saturday I went to Middleton inhabited by my eldest cousin & husband. The park is very large & said to be the finest in three counties. The house is very large, like an Italian villa, built in Louis XVI style. Anything more gloomy than two people (my cousin in law Lawrence is jealous as a moor & has the temper of a fiend) shut up in this house you can’t conceive. And I question whether any house has seen so much family folly, misbehaviour & wickedness, such violence & misery in forty years, as this has. It is much worse to me than any amount of *Wuthering Heights*: a complication of wrongs & folly & wretchedness & violence in a large family. The house is full of portraits brought from the West Indies, & it is curious how like all these people are to my mother, brother & cousins. The odd part is that ~~I am per~~ all these rather amiable, intelligent, easily rakish but tolerably normal looking West Indians seem to have been curdled into something bad by the mixture of a strong & violent type in the shape of an iron New Englander, a godfearing [*sic*] soldier of Washington, whose legend is that he had the arm which was blown off, rearmed in the canon & fired back on the enemy.

All the frightful earnestness & obstinacy is from him. The melancholy thing is to see everywhere, in this house, where the only thing aspired after was supremacy, the only thing preserved is enmity & indulgence was rampant, the good quiet motto of grandpapa, too cold to conceive that his children might be trained to self restraint [*sic*]:

“Aspire, Persevere, Indulge Not.”⁴⁵

For Lee, the Adams’s family portraits bear a close resemblance to those of her cousins, mother and brother. Lee falls short of including herself in this physiognomic analysis, writing “[t]he odd part is that ~~I am per~~ all.” In crossing out “I am per,” Lee was beginning to state “I am perhaps” or “I am personally,” which may have aligned Lee more with her father’s image, or, more than likely, it was an attempt to distance herself away from the colonial portraiture. In striking out the definitive “I am” Lee returns to an impersonal critique of her family in which the West Indies colonisers’ blood is curdled by that of a colonial New Englander. William Oke bears the same critique of the Oke family: it is the mixing of familial lines that leads to disaster: “the first time an Oke [Nicholas] married a Pomfret [ancestral Alice].”⁴⁶

In the extract above, Lee only uses the first-person singular pronoun twice: “I went” and “I question.” This seems to perfectly sum up the relationship Lee has with this branch of the family tree. Lee is unlike them in looks and in beliefs. This consideration of lineage through portraiture is connected

thematically with “Oke of Okehurst.” Kamilla Elliott argues that the painted portrait “invert[s] and join[s] absent presence,” and that in writing these works of art into a text “authors inscribe narratives of present absence that promise future usurpation. The past is absent, but its presence as absence proclaims that, just as what is past is absent now, so too, what is now present will be absent in future.”⁴⁷ Therefore the picture of ancestral Alice that hangs in the hull-like hall of Okehurst is both a presence and an absence. It is a hauntological remnant, a version of ancestral Alice that exists within the space of Okehurst, and signifies the lack of ancestral Alice simultaneously. Not only does this portrait highlight that ancestral Alice is a historical figure, but that present-day Alice, in sitting for her portrait, will also soon be an absent figure, represented or memorialised on canvas. Drawing a parallel here between Lee’s own experience of the Middleton portraits and those of the Okes, the hull-like hall of Okehurst metaphorically carries the Adams’ family portraits back to Britain from the West Indies. But Alice wants to identify with her ancestress, despite her outlying position within the family, whereas Lee refuses her place in the Middleton family gallery.

Elliott also believes that the gender politics of paintings are significant, with “matriarchal picture identifications in Gothic fiction” having the ability to “undermine, overthrow, and reform patriarchs.”⁴⁸ Ancestral Alice Oke’s friendship with, and subsequent murder of, the poet Lovelock had the potential to disrupt and potentially undermine the Oke line. Furthermore, present-day Alice’s presence at Okehurst appears to fulfil a prophecy made by Nicholas Oke on his deathbed, “that when the head of his house and the master of Okehurst should marry another Alice Oke, descended from himself and his wife, there should be an end to the Okes of Okehurst.”⁴⁹ Alice is disrupting the familial line and its visual representation – the portrait gallery – by identifying herself with her namesake. She becomes indefinable object/ subject, one that exists hauntologically, both as her past and present self. The connection between ancestral Alice and present-day Alice is not just simply through the institution of marriage and descent, but through a shared aesthetic ideal and a deep admiration of Lovelock and his poetry.

This visit to the family home in Carmarthenshire also reveals to Lee her own ancestral family’s tendencies towards claiming supremacy, fostering enmity and indulgence. These qualities evident in the Adams family seem in diametric opposition to the grandfather’s motto of “Aspire, Persevere, Indulge Not” which suggests a “do as I say, not as I do” approach to child rearing. But perhaps these ascetic values were aimed at moderating Adams’s large staff (and not just those resident in Carmarthenshire) rather than the multitudes of children, grandchildren and in-laws (for indeed, if it was an attempt to morally educate the Adams family, it doesn’t appear to have worked). The aristocratic lineage, putting slaves to work for profit

and the benefit of a lavish and indulgent lifestyle is something Lee returns to in her oeuvre as an antithesis to her own moral erectness, as can be seen in works such as *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (1886).⁵⁰

Unlike Adams's family with their sprawling network of cousins and distant relatives, the Okes only appear to have one another. Both William and Alice discuss their lineage, but never mention close relations; even when discussing their childhood, it appears that they were each other's only family, with their seventeenth-century relations used to scare. William tells the artist narrator: "They used to tell it us when we were children [...] and to frighten my cousin – I mean my wife – and me with stories about Lovelock."⁵¹ The "they" of William's anecdote are disembodied figures, without an identity. One can assume that for a family such as the Okes at Okehurst, the children would have been taken care of by a nanny or governess, or perhaps left to be entertained by the servants. The tale of adulterous ancestors and murdered poets seems unlikely to have been polite table talk amongst the family at meal-time. The absence of the presence of others – apart from the artist narrator – at Okehurst is conspicuous by their absence. Lee suggests that the house is staffed more than adequately when William says to Alice "for mercy's sake, don't talk about such things before the servants."⁵² Alice responds: "The servants! Gracious heavens! Do you suppose they haven't heard the story? Why, it's as well known as Okehurst itself in the neighbourhood."⁵³ The way in which the Oke family manages its *help* so that it remains an unseen – and un-thanked – support system brings the reader back once more to the paratextual correspondence of Lee. Middleton's servants, many brought over to Britain from the West Indies, existed in the shadows of the ancestral home. These servants, past and present, appear in passing comments between Alice and William, and they haunt Okehurst. They are not fully embodied, but the reader is aware they are there as how would a house like Okehurst function without them? Who would indulge Alice's whims and wishes?

In conclusion, to approach *Hauntings*, and more specifically "Oke of Okehurst, or A Phantom Lover," without recourse to the paratextual examples provided, is not to miss out on any of the narrative pleasure. Yet Lee's title – *Hauntings* – an example of what Genette would term "defective," brings about a question of accuracy – as the review from the *Pall Mall* pointed out.⁵⁴ Lee playfully signposts this inaccuracy, or does she? Is this, in effect a title for the reader to indicate what to expect, or is Lee writing purely for herself and for those who knew her – Lemon, Robinson and Boutourline? In bringing to the fore autobiographical details from Lee's life, and epitextual material, we are able to see that the roots of the places and events in "Oke of Okehurst" are fixed in the soil of reality. The spaces and people Lee transposes into "Oke" were once living or were forms to be physically experienced. Lee emphasises the fleetingness of experience and feeling, as those

moments experienced, or persons embodied are no longer in Lee's presence/present. But it is evident from the paratextual material that these disembodied acts and historical places lingered in Lee's memory; they are that which haunts Lee; or, are Lee's hauntings.

Lee's *Hauntings* are of the purely mnemonic kind: the spurious ghosts encountered are those that have haunted Lee's mind, not spooky houses. The hauntological exists in the traces of the exotic; both in Alice's psychological makeup and the ephemera that decorates Okehurst. And whilst these apparitions are ephemeral and intransigent, on our initial reading of the text, the paranormal entities manifest more often, and with more clarity, when considered alongside the paratextual evidence.

Notes

1. Anon., "Vernon Lee's Hauntings", *Pall Mall Gazette*, April 23, 1890. British Library Newspapers, GALE Y3200422904.
2. Ibid.
3. Oliver Tearle, "Vernon Lee", in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, eds. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 150–58 (p. 155).
4. Vernon Lee, "Preface", in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2006), p. 37.
5. Ibid., p. 40.
6. Tearle, p. 151.
7. Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 11–12, 1885, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee 1856–1935, Volume II*, eds. Sophie Geoffroy and Amanda Gagel (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 59–62.
8. Sophie Geoffroy, "Vernon Lee's Life and Letters 1885–1889", in *Selected Letters, Vol. II*, p. xlv. About Robinson's Songs, see Ana Parejo Vadillo, "Immaterial Poetics: A. Mary F. Robinson and the Fin-de-Siècle Poem", in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), n. 57 (p. 260). Peter ("Pierre") Boutourline (Petr Dmitrievich Buturlin; 1859–1895), born in Florence, was a Russian diplomat and poet. In January 1885, Lee writes to Mary Robinson that he had just gone to Kiev; and the dedication reads like a letter of invitation to return; he comes back for his sister's wedding in October 1885 and stays on a few months in Florence, making plans for the staging of Mary's garden play (February 1, 1886): "I told Peter Boutourline about yr garden play, & he is wild to act it at Careggi." He has chosen the actors – Bellamy, you; Hilaria, Zina or Miss Elaguine; & he & his brother Alexandre the women. He has conceived marvellous dresses for himself (with pearls! Dear Miss Paget – "avec beaucoup de jais, n'est-ce-pas – surtout beaucoup de jais!") and conceived marvellous scenes with orange trees in the distance & a *rampe* of "real jonquils planted in the ground!" Feb. 13, 1886: "Elena French offers to hire peacocks, as Boutourline refuses to act without them & many hidden pots of violets!" Mary Robinson will eventually publish her play in *Songs, Ballads, and a Garden Play* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1888).

The play, entitled “Our Lady of the Broken Heart”, refers to Robinson’s jealousy and heartbreak over Lee’s friendship for Alice Callander and attraction to Lady “Archie” (Archibald Campbell) and emulated the latter’s Coombe pastoral plays.

9. Vernon Lee to William Blackwood, April 13, 1886, *Selected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 175.
10. Anthony Mandal, “The Ghost Story and the Victorian Literary Marketplace”, in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, pp. 32–39 (p. 36).
11. Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, June 8, 1886, *Selected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 174.
12. Vernon Lee to William Blackwood, June 8, 1886, *Selected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 175.
13. Mandal, pp. 33–34.
14. Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, August 25, 1886, *Selected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 225.
15. “Oke of Okehurst; Or, A Phantom Lover” has recently (2020) been repackaged and republished for the #ReclaimHerName campaign organised by the *Bailey’s Prize for Women’s Fiction*. In a rather misguided attempt to publish Lee under her birth name, the campaign reproduced a copy of *A Phantom Lover* by Violet Paget (2020).
16. Tearle, p. 151.
17. Vernon Lee, *Alice Oke; roman traduit de l’anglais par Michel Desforges* (Toulouse: Ombres, 1990).
18. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 157.
19. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, “Introduction: A Future for Haunting”, in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, eds. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 1–20 (p. 11).
20. Gérard Genette, “The Proustian Paratext”, *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, 17.2 (1988) 62–77 (63).
21. Tearle, p. 150.
22. To view the complete MSS, see *Holographical-Lee (HoL)*, <<https://eman-archives.org/HoL/items/show/1804>>.
23. Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 15, 1882, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee 1856–1935 Volume I*, eds. Amanda Gagel and Sophie Geoffroy (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 378–79.
24. Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 13, 1882, *Selected Letters Vol. I*, p. 377.
25. Mark Riley, “Place as Palimpsest: Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger and the Haunting of Todtnauberg”, in *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, eds. Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 23–40 (p. 23).
26. Merlin Coverley, *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past* (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2020), p. 52.
27. The other fantastic tale written by Lee and situated in Britain is “The Hidden Door”, published in Henry Norman (ed.), *Unwin’s Annual, 1887: The Witching Time, Tales for the Year’s End* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886).
28. Lee, p. 133.
29. Fittleworth Parish Council, *Fittleworth Neighbourhood Development Plan, 2018–2033*, (2018), 12 Aug. 2020 <<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Fittleworth-Pre-Submission.pdf>>.
30. Emma Liggins, *The Haunted House in Women’s Ghost Stories: Gender, Space and Modernity, 1850–1945* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Gothic, 2020), p. 7.

31. Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, August 21, 1885, *Selected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 87.
32. Vernon Lee to Mary Robinson, September 3, 1886, *Selected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 232.
33. Sarah Stuart, "In Want of an Heir", *Kent Life* (November 2016), 28 Jul. 2020 <<https://www.kent-life.co.uk/out-about/history-scrapbook-november-2016-1-4774497>>.
34. "Captain Nicholas Toke", 28 Jul. 2020 <<https://godintonhouse.co.uk/house/>>.
35. Lee, p. 111.
36. Ibid., p. 118.
37. Ibid., p. 110.
38. Ibid., p. 112.
39. Ibid., p. 121.
40. Peter Gunn. *Vernon Lee, Violet Paget, 1856–1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 14.
41. Ibid.
42. The Adams's family tree was traced back using ancestry.co.uk. Sally Blackburn-Daniels has produced a family tree, including searchable Census, Birth, Death and Marriage Indexes, and other records. See Sally Blackburn-Daniels's doctoral thesis '*The Scholar's Copy Book*' and the '*Blotting-Book Mind*': *Stratigraphic Approaches to Interdisciplinary Reading and Writing in the Work of Vernon Lee* (2019).
43. "Edward Hamlin Adams, Profile & Legacies Summary", *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership*, 10 Oct. 2017 <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146645839>>.
44. Jill Davies, "Vernon Lee and her Abadam cousins", *Vernon Lee Online*. <https://videopress.com/v/8FPxmuYs>
45. Vernon Lee to Mary Robinson, August 8, 1882, *Selected Letters*, Vol. I, p. 394.
46. Lee, p. 121.
47. Kamilla Elliott, *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction: The Rise of Picture Identification, 1764–1835* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 5.
48. Ibid., p. 17.
49. Lee, p. 131.
50. See Sally Blackburn-Daniels's doctoral thesis, '*The Scholar's Copy Book*' and the '*Blotting-Book Mind*': *Stratigraphic Approaches to Interdisciplinary Reading and Writing in the Work of Vernon Lee* (2019).
51. Lee, p. 124.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 57.
55. Vernon Lee, *Oke of Okehurst*, MSS, title page, 1886, Spring to August. With the kind permission of Geneviève Noufflard. Editor: Projet EMAN, Holographical-Lee, Sophie Geoffroy, Université of La Réunion & Institut des textes et manuscrits modernes, CNRS-ENS. Consulted 07/06/2021, platform EMAN: <<https://eman-archives.org/HoL/files/show/7581>>.
56. Vernon Lee, *The Legend of Hilarion*, MSS, title page, 1886, December. With the kind permission of Geneviève Noufflard. Editor: Projet EMAN, Holographical-Lee, Sophie Geoffroy, Université de La Réunion & Institut des textes et

manuscripts modernes, CNRS-ENS. Consulted 07/06/2021, platform EMAN: <<https://eman-archives.org/HoL/files/show/7800>>.

57. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Legend of Hilarion, Nativity by Filippo Lippi and dedication to Mary Robinson*, 1886. With the kind permission of Geneviève Noufflard. Editor: Projet EMAN, Holographical-Lee, Sophie Geoffroy, Université de La Réunion & Institut des textes et manuscrits modernes, CNRS-ENS. Consulted 07/06/2021 platform EMAN: <<https://eman-archives.org/HoL/files/show/7801>>.
58. Anon., *Map of Lower Horncroft 1897–1900*, RNC769395. Copyright: The Francis Frith Collection.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr *Sally Blackburn-Daniels* is currently a Research Assistant in the department of English and Creative Writing at The Open University, UK. She is working currently working on turning her thesis – a single author study of Vernon Lee – into a monograph. Sally is a reviewer of Victorian Poetry for the Years' Work in English Studies and is co-editing a special issue on Vernon Lee. Her current publications include: “‘Struggling with the tempter’: the Queer Archival Spaces of Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson, and Amy Levy,” in *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* (2020), and “A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee’s *The Ballet of the Nations*,” in *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* (2020). Sally is the Communications Officer for the International Vernon Lee Society (IVLS). sally.blackburn-daniels@open.ac.uk

Sophie Geoffroy is Professor (English Literature) at the University of La Réunion (France). She is the founding Chair for the International Vernon Lee Society (IVLS), the founding editor of *The Sibyl, Journal of Vernon Lee Studies* and directs the Holographical Lee project (HoL) hosted on the eMAN platform of the ITEM-ENS-CNRS. Sophie was associate editor for the *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee 1856–1935, Volume I*, edited by Amanda Gagel. She is the chief editor of the *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee 1856–1935, Volume II* (New York & London: Routledge, 2020), with Amanda Gagel (associate editor) and currently editing *Volume III* of these letters. geoffroysophie974@gmail.com